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ABSTRACT

This document discusses sexist undergraduate admissions. Three primary strategies are presented to make admission less sexist. These strategies suggest: (1) the undergraduate structure can be changed so that more places are open to women; (2) undergraduate institutions can actively recruit qualified women applicants; and (3) undergraduate institutions can change their review procedures. (MJM)

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When Are Undergraduate Admissions Sexist? The Case of Stanford University

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Stendhal once said:

> "P[illegible]s have for two thousand years reiterated the notion that women have a more lively spirit, men more solidity; that women have more delicacy in their ideas and men greater power of attention."

He continued, however, that:

> "A Paris idler who once took a walk in the Versailles Gardens concluded that, judging from all he saw, the trees grow ready trimmed."

I'm sure that all of us have at many times in our undergraduate, graduate, and professional lives also encountered this idea that there are characteristics of men and women that -- like trimmed trees -- are natural. I'd like today to talk about some of these ideas as they relate to the admission of men and women to undergraduate educations. Many of the ideas have led to policies that are sexist and discriminatory, though not in the most obvious ways.

Much of what I say today will be based upon the policies and practices of Stanford University. This is not to single it out as an unusual sinner. It isn't. In fact I think it's an excellent undergraduate university for both men and women. Rather the focus on Stanford comes from my two years' intimate examination of undergraduate admission there. This examination occurred during the academic years 70-71 and 71-72 when I served on a university committee charged to examine all the implications of any change in admission policy.

When Stanford was founded, Senator Stanford charged Trustees: "To afford equal facilities and give equal advantages to both sexes." By the end of the nineteenth century, enrollment had gone from three men for every woman to two men for every woman. Senator Stanford was dead and Mrs. Stanford feared that the University might wind up a women's seminary. So she placed a limit of 500 on the number of women who could be enrolled at any one time at Stanford.

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This limit held until the 1930's when the ratio was five to one. At this point the Trustees reinterpreted Mrs. Stanford's dictum as meaning not "500" but a ratio like that when she set the 500 limit. Thus for forty years -- except during World War II -- Stanford enrolled twice as many undergraduate men as women.

In 1970, the University realized that such a limitation might be legally or politically impossible to maintain. It consequently set about examining the potential effects of changes in the ratio. My knowledge comes from participating in this examination.

There are four principal points I want to make as I talk about the issues we encountered in our work:

1. Sexism in undergraduate admissions in its most overt form is hard to document in most colleges and universities.

2. Sexism is very prevalent in the beliefs of students, faculty, administrators, and trustees.

3. Sexism is very prevalent in the structure of colleges and universities.

4. There are some practices that can decrease sexism in admissions and such a decrease is desirable.

Turning to the first point, let us examine what we mean by sexism in the admission policies of colleges and universities. First, one may mean denying women the opportunity to be admitted to undergraduate education. In the past few years many rules have been struck down which denied a specific group of people access to a particular place or activity. Blacks and whites can now use the same restrooms, women can enter press clubs, and whites and minorities can live in the same residential area. One still finds, however, at colleges and universities across the nation that women are totally or partially excluded. It is also true that men are sometimes excluded, as in some Eastern women's colleges.

Stanford in 1970 had such a rule, allowing only half as many women as men to enroll as undergraduates. However, it didn't have to enforce this rule since only half as many women as men applied for admission. Nationally one also finds women applying to an institution in about the same ratio as they are admitted. Thus, it is nearly impossible to demonstrate in the yearly admission procedure that women are systematically denied admission even though discriminatory rules exist.

A second way in which admission may be sexist is in choosing to admit men who are either less qualified than, or as qualified as, women who are not admitted. For example, consider a man and woman with the

high school courses and grades, the same SAT scores, from the same geographical area, who are both nationally ranked amateur tennis players, and want to become doctors. If in a number of such cases Stanford regularly admitted only the man, then its admission policy would be clearly sexist.

In most undergraduate institutions this will be hard to demonstrate. Few applicants are ever equal in all the areas admission officers consider. So it would be difficult to find pairs of men and women to compare. However the primary difficulty comes, not from lack of such pairs, but from the desire of most undergraduate institutions to enroll classes with diverse abilities and interests. The goal of diversity at Stanford means that not all of the applicants with the "best" academic and non-academic records are admitted and not all theapplicants with the "worst" are refused. Under these conditions some very gifted men, as well as women, are denied admission and therefore conceivably discriminated against. Thus it becomes very difficult to say when someone is being discriminated against and for what reasons.

The third, and final, form of discrimination in admission occurs in valuing more highly traits and activities that are stereotypically masculine and devaluing those that are feminine. This does occur at Stanford and nationally. It is a complicated issue because in many instances those characteristics which are valued are those which enhance the traditional goals of the school. As I'll discuss more later, these goals are often more "masculine" than "feminine." Thus, for self-preservation (in the status quo) undergraduate institutions need to value traditional masculine achievement more.

At Stanford, as an example, achievement in athletics was highly valued in the admissions review, as were political activity and employment. These are all more masculine achievements in high school. Thus, there was sexism in admissions at this level. Yet it did not decrease the proportion of women admitted below the proportion who applied, making it hard to see sexism operating.

Thus, it is difficult to demonstrate clear discrimination in undergraduate admission at Stanford or elsewhere most of the time. But if one looks at the beliefs held by administrators, faculty, and some students, one does find that they are clearly sexist -- and amazing! Men at Stanford cheerfully told me and other committee members the many "facts" about women:

They said that women are a poor educational investment, less likely to complete their education and less likely to use it. This same view of women is reflected in legal counsel given to Stanford in 1916:

> If conditions should arise whereby in the judgment of the Trustees it would seem advisable to restrict or reduce the number of students, the attendance of women should be secondary to that of men ... If a limitation of numbers is necessary, there is no question but that the public welfare would in general be better served by giving the advantages of the University to men rather than women, as a very small proportion of women make use of the advantages of a college in after life, few of them going into professions or entering upon a business career.

This belief has little validity today. The Newman Report (1971) states that the percentage of entering undergraduate students who graduate in four years is about 15% higher nationally for women than men. And women hold their own in graduate and professional schools as well. Moreover, women who complete their training tend to use it, despite a society that does not often facilitate this. In 1968, 42% of all women of working age were working, 54% of women with bachelor's degrees were working, and 71% of those women with five or more years of higher education were working. More than 90% of the women who received doctorates in 1957-58 were employed in 1964. A 1964 study of all women medical school graduates in 1931, '36, '41, '46, '51, and '56 found that 45% of them had worked full time from the completion of their training and 91% had worked either full time or part time (Powers, Parmelle, and Wiesenfelder, 1969). These findings are corroborated by an unpublished study of Radcliffe alumnae who entered medicine (Williams, unpublished). These statistics, especially when viewed with society's attitudes toward working women in mind, suggest that women are a fine educational investment and that the investment becomes better the more education they obtain.

Acknowledging societal obstacles to full participation by women, some at Stanford argued that it is unfair to raise the aspirations of women by educating them at Stanford when society in general, with which they must cope most of their lives, is not ready to accept them in new, more powerful roles. This is indeed a serious problem, but it is one that seemingly admits of only two solutions: (1) educate no women at all in institutions of Stanford's caliber, or (2) train women to create more options for themselves in society, provide realistic and supportive counseling along the way, and enjoy the benefits of their fuller participation within society. I prefer the second solution.

Others at Stanford believed that recent ratios, ranging from 70:30 to 60:40, might either be to the advantage of women since they provide more dates and certain mates for them or to the advantage of men since they allow less mature men to avoid uncomfortable pressures to date. Yet either stance apparently includes the unfortunate assumption that

the primary purpose of all Stanford women and most Stanford men is finding proper romantic partners. Both also ignore the conclusions of previous study groups:

> The Directors (of the Overseas Campuses) agreed that the ratio of men to women should be kept as close as possible and that high ratios had typically produced considerable friction and antagonism within the group. (Observation of low vs high ratio group student attitudes was consistent with this thought.)
>
> SES Report IX, p. 47
>
> (Ratios at the Overseas Campuses ranged from 62:38 to 50:50.)

> The Committee favors a more balanced ratio among undergraduate students because it would facilitate a more balanced ratio in coeducational residences, a situation this year's experience indicates is desirable. At the same time, one important advantage of coeducational residences is that they effectively reduce the undesirable effects of the current ratio.
>
> SES Report III, p. 32

It is obviously not the job of the University to alleviate all the troubles of its undergraduates. On the other hand, providing a climate which supports healthy personal development, within the limits of the academic purposes of the University, is a reasonable goal. More nearly equal ratios help provide such a climate.

A fourth belief we encountered was that Stanford didn't need as many women as men after the existence of some "critical mass" of women which might be considerably less than 50%. Or it was suggested that women should not be denied equal access to quality institutions but that perhaps there should be diversity among these institutions in the ratio of men to women. Particularly at Stanford, this ratio should not go beyond 60:40 if the University were to preserve and emphasize those areas in which it is already strong.

There is some merit in the "critical mass" position, in that education is "enhanced" by interaction with representatives of many different cultures, subcultures, viewpoints, etc., and that equal distribution is not necessary for this enhancement. However, to the extent that an institution is committed to facilitate formal and informal intellectual exchange between the sexes as peers, it does not make sense to argue that it is to the advantage of either sex to have one sex in the minority. Intellectual exchange may even be encouraged by an equal ratio in that such equality would remove the covert cultural message that intellectual women are somehow unusual.

Theoretically, but not operationally, it is reasonable that there should be diversity among institutions in the ratio of men to women undergraduates. Theoretically appealing, this position ignores both the history and current structure of higher education. The great private universities were generally founded for and shaped around the needs of male students in a period when it was assumed that higher education of males was more vital than that of females. Thus, there is no great private female university that could move slowly to admitting 40%, 45%, or even 50% males while Stanford adjusts its ratio to 60%, 55%, or even 50% males. The only all-female schools of comparable quality are basically the eastern women's colleges, which are numerically small, and exactly what they are called -- colleges. There is no central way in which the desired national diversity could be reached that would insure that some universities would admit more women while other comparable schools would admit more men. Indeed, with current cultural attitudes towards men and women, there is no reason to believe such a state of balance would arrive by natural processes.

The fifth and final belief we encountered was that there aren't as many good women as men available to attend Stanford. This view is not new, as the following quotation illustrates:

> How long it may take the woman of the future to recover the ground which has been lost in the psychological race by the woman of the past, it is impossible to say; but we may predict with confidence that, even under the most favorable conditions as to culture, and even supposing the mind of man to remain stationary, ... it must take many centuries for heredity to produce the missing five ounces of the female brain.
>
> ... George Romanes, nineteenth century

It is difficult to evaluate the intellectual capability of men and women at any stage in life. The available tests and data are certainly not what one might desire either in quality or quantity. Yet if we use them as a guide, we find that very nearly equal numbers of men and women graduate from high school (U.S. Labor Department, 1969). Women have better grades in high school, even in areas in which their achievement test scores are lower than men's (Newman, 1971). Women score higher on tests of verbal skill, and men score higher on tests of mathematical and scientific skill (College Entrance Examination Board, 1967; Holland and Richards, 1967). Women perform well in college. Thus, there is little support for the belief that women are less intellectually capable than men.

After hearing all these beliefs and trying -- usually unsuccessfully-- to counter them, I have to agree with Kierkegaard when he said:

> To be a woman is something so strange, so confused, so complicated, that no one predicate comes near expressing it and that the multiple predicates that one would like to use are so contradictory that only a woman could put up with it.

I even wonder if a <u>woman</u> can -- or should -- put up with it.

What are the effects of these beliefs? There are two. First, fewer places available for women at the "best" undergraduate institutions. Second, undergraduate structures that are sexist in assuming all students are basically masculine -- even if their genitalia are different.

In the mid-60's there were many fewer places available for women at high quality undergraduate institutions than for men. This is still true today. More highly competent women than men do not continue their education after high school. Those women who do continue, however, are not as likely as their male peers to be enrolled in a first-rate institution. As recently as the mid-60's many fewer women than men were enrolled in the prestigious colleges, colleges within a university complex, and universities across the nation. These differences cannot be explained by the difference in the proportions of the most talented men and women continuing on to college (Bridgman, 1960). For instance, in 1964 there were about 112,100 men and 116,900 women in the top 10% of the high school graduates that year. Using national enrollment rates as a guide, one might assume that 85% of these men and 65% of these women enrolled in college that year. This amounts to about 95,000 men and 76,000 women who are highly qualified and enroll in college. The most prestigious institutions of higher education enrolled about 24,000 women and 46,000 men in the middle of the 60's (College Entrance Examination Board, 1967). The first ratio is about 56:44, while the second is 66:34! The disparity is significantly greater if one looks only at enrollment in universities and colleges within a university complex.

Once women are admitted and enroll in a prestigious university or college, they encounter a masculine structure. For instance, at Stanford -- which has had women since it began and thus is less sexist than places like Princeton, Yale, and Dartmouth -- one finds that its academic strengths are masculine. It has excellent departments of engineering and the hard sciences. It does a good job of training students for graduate and professional schools. Masculine forms of athletics are emphasized and rewarded at Stanford. The faculty and administrators are nearly all men and they more easily fraternize with and thereby influence the male students. Finally, definitions of success and the paths to it are stereotypically masculine. While this is not so crucial for undergraduates, it becomes more important as one considers assuming the roles of wife and mother and still remaining stereotypically successful.

What can one do to make admission to undergraduate education less sexist? I think there are three primary strategies. First, one can change the undergraduate structure so that more places are open to women. At the simplest level this would entail removing legal barriers to admission. Stanford and every undergraduate institution can do this. Stanford already has. Although it is more difficult to do, one can change institutional goals from the traditionally masculine ones to those that encompass a wider range of interests. In this time of limited funds and declining enrollment, it's particularly hard for institutions to do this. But they can consciously choose to approach this goal gradually. Unfortunately, most have not chosen to do this.

Second, undergraduate institutions can actively recruit qualified women applicants. Graduate and professional schools have done more of this than have undergraduate programs. But there is no reason that a university like Stanford could not recruit more women applicants. Judging from the experience of graduate and professional schools, it may help. For example, enrollment from the mid-sixties to now has gone from about 7% to 18% in law, 1% to 14% in business, 11% to 18% in medicine, and 0.6% to 4% in engineering (Moses, 1974). Some of this change must be attributed to the changing aspirations of women, not simply to recruiting. Still the increases do suggest that recruiting can help.

Third, undergraduate institutions can change their review procedures. I don't believe it's possible to use a formula. People are too diverse and the needs of the institution too varied to have one formula. I also don't believe one can ignore an applicant's sex, age, race, or residence. These are important variations and important factors to consider in evaluating the magnitude of an applicant's achievement. One can, however, have sympathetic reviewers representing a diversity of backgrounds. Applications can be read by a number of different reviewers who rate an applicant without knowing what other reviewers have said. One can also at various points in the admissions process examine the characteristics of those who are admitted and compare them to the characteristics of the entire applicant pool. Finally, one can make the admission process and data from it open to scrutiny and review by anyone in the academic institution. I think this is essential in achieving non-discriminatory undergraduate admission.

But if one could achieve these changes and remove sexism from undergraduate admissions, why should one want to? Why would women want to go to Stanford? Taking the most cynical view, I would say go to Stanford so you can go on to experience the kind of discrimination the other panel members will talk about today. Less cynically, I would say go to Stanford or a similar institution to get the kind of training more readily available there. If you're interested in

science or engineering, if you want to enter into graduate or professional degree programs, or if you want to be brainwashed to believe in your own abilities and right to a satisfying career, go to Stanford. But not everyone would agree such an education is desirable for women. An older, but still encountered, view of the "right" training for women is found in the work of G. Stanley Hall, an eminent psychologist:

> First, the ideal institution for the training of girls from twelve or thirteen on into the twenties, when the period most favorable to motherhood begins, should be in the country in the midst of hills, the climbing of which is the best stimulus for heart and lungs, and tends to mental elevation and breadth of view. There should be water for boating, bathing, and skating, aquaria and aquatic life; gardens both for kitchen vegetables and horticulture; forests for their seclusion and religious awe ...
>
> Another principle should be to broaden by retarding; to keep the purely mental back and by every method to bring the intuitions to the front, appeals to tact and taste should be incessant; a purely intellectual man is no doubt biologically a deformity, but a purely intellectual woman is far more so.
>
> ...G. Stanley Hall, 1904

Whatever the rationale, the changes I've suggested are important primarily because they would give to women the same range of options men how have. Whether women want the pain -- and the pleasure -- that come with these options is another matter entirely. They must be given access to them; then they can choose.

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